



Amah Mutsun Tribal Band of Costanoan/Ohlone Indians
Historically known as "San Juan Bautista Band and San Juan Band" Indians of California
PO Box 5272 | Galt, CA 95622

July 1, 2015

HIs Holiness Pope Francis
Casa de Marta
Vatican City Rome
00120
Italy

Re: Amah Mutsun's Response to Catholic Church's Encyclical on the Environment

Your Holiness, Pope Francis,

My name is Valentin Lopez and I am the Chairman of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band. Our historic and continuous Tribe is comprised of the documented descendants of the indigenous peoples taken to Missions San Juan Bautista and Santa Cruz in the State of California, United States of America. This is the fifth letter our Tribe is writing to Your Holiness. To date, our Tribe has received no response to our letters. Our previous letters are available at www.amahmutsun.org.

We are writing at present to support and applaud Your Holiness for issuing the Encyclical Letter of June 18, 2015 regarding the environment. The Encyclical discusses the role of humanity in acting as stewards of our environment and specifically rejects the view that humans have the right to exploit and dominate nature with impunity. It is because of the message set forth in your Encyclical that we are reiterating our request that Your Holiness reverse the decision to canonize Junipero Serra and to rescind the Papal Bulls that devastated all indigenous peoples.

The position in the Encyclical is consonant with the very heart of our Native American culture and spirituality and has been at the core of our belief since the time of our creation. At the time of first contact with Catholic missionaries and Spanish soldiers, the Bay Area and Central Valley of California had the highest Native population densities north of Mexico City. Within California as a whole there were over 400 autonomous tribes whose members spoke more than 100 different languages. Our ancestors lived on these lands for well over 12,000 years and perhaps as many as 800 to 1,000 generations.

Our Amah Mutsun creation story tells us that Creator specifically chose our people to live on the lands of our traditional tribal territory. Our ancestors had a sacred covenant with Creator in which we were entrusted to take care of our kin -- the plants and animals -- that in turn took care of our ancestors. Conservation and stewardship were everyday practices. Rather than seeking to dominate the natural world, our ancestors had intimate social networks and applied traditional methods of tending and stewardship which enhanced the abundance and quality of our cultural resources. For example, they

managed landscapes with regular burning that rejuvenated the land and they dug and replanted bulbets and cormlets and dispersed seeds. Their harvesting of plant resources, fishing, and hunting took place inside a biologically diverse ecosystem with sustainable harvesting occurring as part of ecosystem processes. Our ancestors valued our relationship with all things: plants, animals, air, wind, water, geographical features, families, and most importantly, Creator. We did not pray to trees, rocks or other objects. Instead, our ancestors prayed to Creator for the trees, rocks and all elements of our natural world.

It is because our ancestors saw themselves as part of and stewards for the natural world that our Amah Mutsun Tribe read your Encyclical of June 18, 2015 with great interest. It seems like Your Holiness is asking all people to care for and love Mother Earth in the same way that our ancestors did for thousands of years.

The Encyclical states, "Many intensive forms of environmental exploitation and degradation not only exhaust the resources which provide local communities with their livelihood, but also undo the social structures which, for a long time, shaped cultural identity and their sense of the meaning of life and community.... [I]t is essential to show special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions." In another section the Encyclical notes that to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation is a sin. Our Amah Mutsun people have always known this to be an incontrovertible truth.

However, if the Catholic Church truly believes that destructive behaviors against the environment, cultures and peoples are sins, then how can the Church canonize a man who established a system that set out to destroy Indian social structures, cultural identity and the meaning of native life and community? How can the Church confer sainthood on Serra who forbade Indians from speaking their indigenous languages and living in their indigenous settlements, thereby destroying the thousands of years of knowledge and experience of sustainable land stewardship? Our oral history tells of one Indian who regularly spoke his language even after a number of severe beatings. The priest ordered that the Indian's tongue be cut off so he would no longer speak his language.

How too can the Church ignore that Serra's mission system forever changed California ecosystems, replacing bear, deer, elk and native plants with mega herds of grass-devouring sheep, cattle, pigs, horses and European plants and invasive weeds that were raised by the missions for profit using involuntary, unpaid and underfed Indian labor? How can the Church countenance the brutal methods by which missionaries kept Indians at the missions as virtual slaves of the clergy? It is documented that many boys over the age of 10 had hernias due to the heavy labor they were forced to perform. When an Indian ran away, he was often hunted down, lassoed and dragged back to the missions. Our oral history reports that it was not uncommon for the mission officials to beat the bottom of the feet of runaways so as to break bones so they would not try to run away again. It is also well-documented that many Indian women were raped by the guards that locked them in at night. When a woman became pregnant by a rapist, she would often try to abort the pregnancy. If a woman had a miscarriage, the priests said it was due to her having demons within her and she would be severely beaten to expel them from her body. It is recorded that when some women gave birth, they would cup their hand over the newborn's mouth to suffocate it so the infant would not be raised within the slave-like conditions of the missions.

The Encyclical of June 18, 2015 takes a courageous and laudable position regarding the environment. Yet how can the Catholic Church encourage humanity worldwide to take a more respectful and judicious path toward the natural world while refusing to acknowledge its own key role in California in the historical destruction of indigenous cultures and peoples as well as in the degradation of the natural environment?

What the missions of the Catholic Church did to the Indians in California was sinful and evil. Your Encyclical Letter is very clear in recognizing the rights of other beings, the importance of human dignity, and the devastation that occurs when people lose their identity. However, preventing native people from following their indigenous values and practices – i.e., stripping them of their indigenous identity that gave their lives purpose and meaning – and imposing mission life by force upon Indians who did not consent and who could not leave is precisely the system that Serra devised and realized with the assistance of Spanish soldiers. The consequences were devastating both for native people and their relationship to the environment.

By ignoring well documented facts regarding California mission life and seeking to confer sainthood upon Junipero Serra who was the architect of this rapacious system, the Catholic Church seriously compromises its ability to speak with moral authority regarding what others world-wide should do. In a word, to canonize Serra in light of the values extolled in your Encyclical Letter, is hypocritical.

We therefore request again that Your Holiness reject plans to canonize Junipero Serra as his well-documented actions are antithetical to the position currently set forth in the recent Encyclical as well as to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Further, we see that the Encyclical Letter discusses reconciliation, a topic that we had mentioned in our previous letters, asking Your Holiness to work with indigenous peoples to help us recover from severe historic trauma. We also spoke of the need for the Catholic Church to heal from their role as perpetrators. Although we have received no response to our previous letters, we once again request a meeting with you, Your Holiness, at the Vatican before the end of July so we can present the true history of Serra and the missions. We also invite the Church to work with our Tribe so we both can heal from the wounds caused by our history. We also encourage Your Holiness to work with indigenous peoples to help heal Mother Earth.

Finally, we again recognize the importance of reiterating that this letter and our efforts are not directed against the Catholic Church per se. Many of our members are Catholic and/or Christian. Instead, our opposition is specifically to the canonization of Serra and to the Papal Bulls which brought near complete destruction to our ancestors and indigenous people everywhere.

Holy Father, you ended the Encyclical Letter with A Prayer for Our Earth and A Christian Prayer in Union with Creation. We end this letter with a Mutsun Tribal Prayer that Amah Mutsun members approved in June, 2014. We hold this prayer close to our heart. (Note: Popeloutchum refers to our traditional tribal territory.)

MUTSUN SAAREMIN

*hoole, makkenii Tawra, namtiy makke saare:
hoole, menharas makkese TiTse, Tumsan-ak makkese,
hoole, men hara makkese tawahse uTTasi Popeloutcume, Tumsan-ak makkese
hoole, tapah makke saaremi wuuTatise, komyempiy haysa,
hoole, makke saaremi wuuTakma numan munna mokkon, niipampit makkese amSi haysa namti,
amSi haysa muySin, yuu amSi haysa nahamen-howsomsakmase; himah'a tuuhis
hoole, makke saaremi pirese, pire kata aanan.
makke saaremi himah'a huuyise, huuyi kata taarekse,
makke saaremi humus makse, humus kata taarekse.
makke saaremi himah'a uuTit koroomin tareksekemase;
hoole, makke saaremi himah'a pire cutsumak, haysa-ya mak-tareksekma
hoole, makke Tuukaaymuhtesiise yuu Tarahse,
hoole, makke TuukakatYmiSmine aaTeytak
tonsempit makkese katYmiSmine ramma mak-mooheltak, mak-amatka, mak-siretka, mak-nossowtak.
katYmimpiy uuTit tammaritak;
katYmimpiy uuTit Taalaway, tuurisway, yuu ammaniway;
hoole, makke saremi Takci okse wuuTatismak
hoole, makke saremi Takci yete wuuTatismak,
hoole, muySiniy yuu uTTasiy makke hiwhoSikmase yuu mukyuSikmase;
hoole, muySiniy yuu uTTasiy makke sinnimakse;
hoole, harat makkese cayicse yuu hinnuse
amSi makke hiimi hiSse miSmine, amSi makke miSSimpi hissen.
hoole, makke Tuukanepkam hiS'amakse neppe Tuuhis.*

HO!

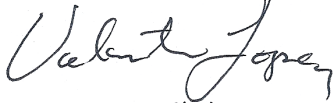
MUTSUN PRAYER

Creator, we are here; please hear our prayer;
Creator, we thank you for the life you have given us;
Creator, we thank you for giving us the obligation to care for Popeloutchum;
Creator, today we pray for our ancestors, may they rest in peace;
Creator, we pray for our descendants yet to come; may we teach them to understand,
to love, and to live your commandments every day;
Creator, we pray for Mother Earth;
We pray for all fish, our finned (water) brothers and sisters;
We pray for all birds, our winged brothers and sisters;
We pray for all four legged brothers and sisters;
Creator, we pray for all plant life, they too are our brothers and sisters;
Creator, we pray for clean water and air;
Creator, we pray for balance in all things;
May we have balance within our mind, body, soul and spirit;
May there be balance in the four directions;
May there be balance in the four seasons;
Creator, we pray for the seven generations who came before us; and
we pray for the seven generations who will come after us;
Creator, please love and protect our elders;

Creator, please love and protect our children;
Creator, please give us the strength and wisdom
to always do what is right and to make good decision;
Creator, we pray for these things today;

HO!

mak-sireesum, With our heart,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Valentin Lopez". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "V".

Valentin Lopez, Chairman
Amah Mutsun Tribal Band
(916) 743-5833

Amah Mutsun Tribal Ethnohistorian, Dr. Christine Grabowski, assisted in the writing of this letter.